

The Cultural Policy Aspects of Digitalisation of Written Cultural Heritage in Europe and in Hungary

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Abstract

Cultural policy focuses on three basic areas; namely the process of creating culture, „consuming” culture and the preservation of cultural heritage that will insure that culture will be transmitted to the next generation. Companies working in the cultural arena primarily find business opportunities within the first two areas so state has to keep a well-balanced development of each of these three fields.

The digitalisation of written cultural heritage allows us to overview and analyse the incredible number of documents. This could not be done through traditional tools such as catalogues, and bibliographies, etc. Digitalisation also enables us to hand down cultural products created in a given period by allowing access to the digital copies for anyone on an equal basis.

European states, however, gave in the pressure of private companies in the process of digitalisation and allowed, to a considerable extent, free competition in producing digital copies. By doing this, small cultures acquired new handicaps besides the ones they had already had and their chances of presenting their cultural heritage has considerably diminished. Furthermore, the principle of equal access to cultural products has also been violated. The irresponsible attitude of the states do not allow the actors of education – pupils and students as well as teachers and professors – to have free and universal access to cultural heritage maintaining the freedom for interpretation by using modern technology in return for paying tax.

Keywords: *Cultural heritage; Written Culture, Europe; Cultural policy, Hungary; Librarianship*

Introduction

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In the last twenty years the digitalisation of the written cultural heritage of the European countries – and here we do not mean the European Union but the 41 countries belonging to the European Council - , the digital transmission and preservation of cultural heritage have outgrown their national frameworks and become the central theme of several international professional fora. While professional organisations have been discussing the consequences of this digital turn for libraries, museums and archives state institutions in charge of cultural policy have done nothing but follow this discussion. Private actors operating in the cultural sector were very much aware that owning the digital copy of cultural heritage and the right and the potential to transmit cultural heritage is an excellent business opportunity.¹

On the other hand there has been another social group, that of the professionals operating in the collections of cultural heritage (libraries, archives and museums) who were impatient with the slow political and professional decision making process. Private actors operating in the cultural sector have had better financial and technical conditions while professionals had the relevant knowledge and know-how concerning the contents of written cultural heritage and its transmission, dissemination and preservation. Digitalising cultural heritage started on both sides by creating institutions, independent from the existing institutions holding the documents. These new institutions had not existed before, their existence was justified by regulations initiated subsequent to their foundation so these institutions were not formed in a planned manner after clarifying their legal and financial frameworks. State administration realized there were new forms of activity to administer in the new unregulated system and started to create a framework for these without consulting the actors operating in the system. They did this just to ensure their own continuous engagement which remained an end in itself.

¹ Microsoft for example made a contract with the Vatican Library BEFORE the internet existed and bought for a period the right to digitally copy the miniatures of the codices held there. Vatican then believed to make a good contract.

A similar way a new group of legal experts was formed to clarify the legal aspects of the digital turn whose aim was not to ensure the freedom of cultural heritage and cultural creation or equal opportunity and access to all cultural heritage by creating the legal frameworks for the historically formed European common law but to shape the new phenomena to the immanent logic of their own legal world and by doing this to have financial gain. This is why the headquarters of the copy right legal offices were erected even before the digital libraries threatening copy rights were established.

Less money would have been enough to digitalise, post on the internet and make available all written and printed heritage no longer under copy right law than what the member states of the European Union spent under the pretext of the digitalisation of written cultural heritage in the past fifteen to twelve years.

In this present lecture, however, my aim is not to examine the present day political aspect of this issue but to enumerate the questions of a professional who handles cultural heritage and who trains young professionals. I will not touch upon the process of cultural creation or the policy aspect of it since the collections of cultural heritage as institutions influence directly the process of creation of written heritage in only exceptional cases. I would like to state that in my opinion the state has to keep a balance in its threefold function: to give support for the cultural creation, to ensure that consumption of culture is accessible for all social strata and to ensure the preservation of cultural heritage and its transmission from one generation to the next one. If the private sector and private actors today support the creation of culture to a great extent and if the society is rich enough to pay for the consumption of culture then state funds should be focused on preservation. If the majority of the population finds it difficult financially to pay for cultural products (theatre, concert or museum tickets, buying books) then the state has a job to do in this field as well. In any case, if the state supported consumption then it would subsidize creation at the same time and if the state gave support through the collections, which it does not, then it could support all three areas at the same time since by doing this preservation and accessibility would also be provided.

One of the fundamental promises of the new world of the internet is that a digital copy of all written culture is prepared, that all digital collections are handled together as a whole so that they could be seen as a whole and that everyone can access these contents on an equal basis.² Digital creation, especially creating a digital community have produced new forms of enriching cultural heritage. The question, however, is whether creation itself carries a guarantee for the preservation of what was created. Without this guarantee for preservation this type of creation would not be more than a theatre performance or a concert. There is no question about its value but we should ensure that something of this value is transmitted somehow to society through generations.

The digitalisation of written heritage follows the principles above – it wishes to present tradition and contemporary creation together and to give democratic access to all – if the process is fast and strives to be complete. If it is not fast and if the heritage of different cultures are not presented at the same time or to the same extent then reception by the next generation will be manipulated. It is not by chance that in the digital strategy of several European nations there is a demand to counterbalance the unidimensional English element of the internet. This demand explains the speeding up of the French and the Spanish or the German digitalisation. State plays a different role in this process in each country due to the difference in their cultural history and history in general but in any case its role is purposeful. It is easy to see the connection between the fact that Italian culture has been overshadowed and the fact that the Italian

² Every great innovation of the history of media carried a certain promise with itself. Just think of the fact that when printing was invented in Europe contemporary Humanists believed it was enough to create a philologically critical edition of a text from antiquity, or from the sources of Christian faith and then they'll have a grammatically and contentwise always correct text. The enthusiasm of the creator is always to be respected because it frees creative energies.

governments have not given enough attention to this issue. French intellectualism and the Age of Enlightenment had a decisive influence on all other European communities. However, by viewing the relevant contents on the internet today it seems that the 18th century was apparently dominated by the English. This means that for anyone studying this period it should be explained why the 18th century was not dominated by the English. The saddest phenomenon of all is what is happening around Italian culture. From the 15th century for any intellectual a *peregrinatio Italica* was a must if he could afford it, just like for a Christian a visit to Jerusalem or Rome or El Camino, or for a Muslim a pelerinage to Mecca. Nowadays you can mostly read about Renaissance and Humanistic culture in English which insinuates to young people that English culture has always been dominant even if in the period mentioned above England had a marginal effect on Europe (let's not talk about the fact that this isolation was due to their political, economical, religious and cultural policy, that is why history calls it „Splendid Isolation”).

I lay a special emphasis on the way in which the digitalisation of cultural heritage contributed – and in many cases if only it had contributed to – the formation of a common European thinking. Heritage only exceptionally belongs to one particular nation's heritage. The history of European cultural history is the history of influences and receptions. Even the documents mixed physically, cultural trade and even wars had their roles to play in the process which formed a common heritage. No one can, for example, decide which „nation's” heritage a codex including a text from antiquity copied by German monks for the king of Bohemia, illuminated by Italian masters, used in the 15th century in the royal library of Hungary and now kept in a French library belong to. It certainly belongs to all of these. Not to mention the fact that country borders today cannot be interpreted as the borders of national cultural heritage. No one can claim that a book collection in Geneva is not the heritage of Switzerland even if Geneva did not belong to Switzerland until 1815 so most of the books kept there were collected before that time so the creative forces of another community were at work when forming the book collection. Mozart is a well-known „Austrian” composer, this fact is often emphasized by contemporary Austrian politics, but we forget the fact that Salzburg where Mozart was born did not belong to Austria then. No doubt the heritage of Strasbourg belongs to France but it definitely is part of German cultural heritage. If we think of the history of the *Bibliothèque nationale et universitaire* of Strasbourg this heritage belongs to the whole of Europe: in 1870 when the library which had collected books from medieval times was completely burned down by German cannon fire, the emperor called on all German nations and all European countries to help supplement the losses. Each nation sent books. Königsberg for example sent 40.000 documents using up their collection of duplum. The library of Königsberg later on was destroyed so now we can have information on their library by studying the one in Strasbourg. The Königsberg heritage within the Library of Strasbourg is also part of the Russian heritage since Königsberg is today called Kaliningrad and belongs to the Russian Federation. So this collection belongs to France, Germany and Russia but through its contents it is also of the Polish, the Hungarian and many other nations. For example the theses (Dissertationes) of the college of Torun in Poland which was very important in the 17th century and which college was destroyed in World War II can only be found in the Library of Strasbourg (the dissertations of several Hungarian students can only be found here so these copies are unique). A final example: The National Library of Finland is now in Helsinki which is at the same time, the largest Armenian collection today. Since Finland was part of Russia all the publishing houses in the Russian Empire, including the ones in Armenia, sent copies to Helsinki. History favoured the Helsinki collection, it was not destroyed and preserved documents which no longer exist in Armenia.

The experts of each collection know the history of their documents. It is very rare that a collection cannot or would not cooperate in presenting the digital version of their cultural heritage although there are cases for non-cooperation as well, which raises serious political and theoretical questions: can private property rights cover this area, does the owner have the right to shut off his intellectual property (books or

painting, etc) from the members of the community who created the particular intellectual product? In my view he does not have a moral right to do so even if law is on their side.

By quickly presenting cultural heritage digitally each country suggests that the cultural heritage presented is the intellectual product of the community which forms their state today. Therefore, especially in Central Europe, it is a common phenomenon to claim as one's own cultural heritage another community's heritage. When using a digital collection now held in Bucharest for example if it is not mentioned that it was transferred to Bucharest at the end of the 20th century from other parts of Romania where the population did not used to be Romanian, for example from Transylvania or Temes Region that belonged to Hungary until 1920 the user will easily forget the fact that the piece of heritage he is viewing is part of the Hungarian national heritage. There are many instances when the new owner has the least connection to the creation of that piece of intellectual heritage. This way the owner can create itself a significant past if he believes he does not have one. This is how the United States of America owns now a significant part of European cultural heritage.

European states pushed by the private sector to give them free way in digitalisation and providing digital copies of cultural heritage, gave way to private actors to a great extent. This put small cultures in a more difficult position and added to their handicaps. Their chances to show their heritage considerably diminished. Big investors like Google is not interested in digitalising Slovakian or Hungarian texts since the small number of the users who could be interested by these texts do not bring in advertisers or any other sources of income. By giving allowances to economic logic equal opportunity to access cultural products is not respected. The irresponsible behaviour of the states diminished the chances for students and professors (actors in education) to have access to unselected pieces of cultural heritage through the use of modern technology, thus losing the right to free interpretation in return for paying tax. States, of course, can decide to buy all digital contents and make them accessible for all but this would be the privatisation of cultural heritage. The generous founders of big institutions who made their own collections public could not think that there would be a form of privatisation which they should forbid legally at the time of establishing the public collection. I won't mention how corrupt the whole process was since in most part digitalisation in Europe was from public sources. A privately owned company does nothing but fulfill an order but in most cases it could maintain the right to provide digital copies so by referring to it as added value could keep exclusive rights to do the job. Therefore the public collection holding the original document, painting or book, has no chance to protect public property.

Digitalisation of written property allows us to overview the incredible amount of documents and to analyse them by a unified set of aspects and through providing access to everyone to all digital copies makes the transmission of culture created in certain period possible in a unified way. There are many things which influence what gets priority when digitalising a collection. The majority of the institutions believe that first it is the metadata, catalogues and inventories, which should be digitalised. There is not much sense in burdening the internet with pictures, texts or any other documents if we do not say what they are. The most part of the internet documents available today are just „interesting”, posted on the web and even with the material accompanied by metadata it is, in most part, not checked whether the information they provide of the document is correct or not. For experts working for public collections this is a big challenge although in a pragmatic world people do not need to know what they see. On the contrary, there is even a theory which says that whatever people believe is reality so it is OK the way we see it today. Who knows whether it is true what we have thought true for centuries?, ask people the question. This question can, in principle, be raised but it cannot justify the unchecked data which form the consciousness of young people today.

After the metadata the second highest on the priority list of digitalisation for a public institution is how often the physical document is used. This digitalisation can be financed through digitalisation on demande. One person pays for it and then it is available for free for everyone. The person who paid for it can see the digital copies paid by others.

The next one on the priority list is the one on preservation. It means that first those documents should be digitalised the use of which destroys the document itself (fragmented documents, papers printed on acid paper, annuals which break and fragemnt when opened).

Public institutions like to help commercial digitalisation of facsimiles by allowing companies to do the digitalisation themselves. But by allowing digital copies does not mean to get the rights for publishing houses.

To sum it up we can state that the view shared by the institutions holding cultural heritage in Europe is that public collections should stay public including the digital copies of their holdings which should stay available for everyone, readers, students, researchers and business individuals. Businesses could use digital copies in their business activities as apport and give a part of the profit, in proportion with the apport, back to the public collection. No private company could get exclusive rights for the use of digital copies even if the company itself has done the digitalisation.

At the end of my lecture I'll return to where I started: how important it is to handle digital copying and the collection itself together. Every cultural community arrives at a stage when a period in their own cultural history is overshadowed. In Western Europe for example this occured with the period when the language of cultural creation was Latin. Few people can read the pieces originally written in Latin today and even the commnity forgot about the values which were written about in this language, only the interpretation and reinterpretation of certain later periods reach our generation. It is my belief that the state has to provide the means and the possibility for us to re-discover these cultural layers. Private actors will never digitalise Latin books unless they beleive they can sell them at a high price once the nations realize their importance. (Noone has ever said that what was mass digitalised by Google will always be available for free.) The users' interests or the times the documents are to be used will not be taken into consideration regarding these digital copies. So it is up to the public insitutions to represent them and for financing it is up to the states to handle this issue in a responsible manner.

With this lecture I had one goal in mind: to point out that the digitalisation of cultural heritage is not merely a technical problem, a business or political issue or a problem for libraries, museums or archives. All actors of the process should act in a responsible way since the democratic way of the internet is similar to the democratic set-up of a democratic state: legally guaranteed, in principle and theoretically democratic. But in practice there is nowhere equal chance. Our job is to make *de jure* and *de facto* come closer to each other which presupposes frequent and serious dialogues between the actors based on the assumptions that all of them wish good for the community who has provided them with the opportunity to do what they do.